FWP
I GOT THE GENERAL IDEA OF WHAT YOU WERE SAYING.
CRRRK
IT KEPT ME FROM WINDING UP A CORPSE, REALLY.
SWP
THNK...
WHAT KIND OF POISON?
NO, NO. NOT THE TIME.
ARE THOSE POISONED NEEDLES IN THAT QUIVERING HAND?

I CAN'T ESCAPE THROUGH THE WINDOW.
TWO AGAINST ONE. NOT GOOD.
SCRRP...
SCRRP...
BUT I HAVE SO MANY QUESTIONS I WANT TO ASK.
DO I SCREAM ?
OR I COULD TRY SPLASHING THE ALCOHOL IN THEIR FACES AND RUNNING.
HOW DID YOU DO IT?
WHY ARE YOU HERE?

AND PA SHOULD TRACK ME DOWN EITHER WAY.
I'M A CONSORT'S FOOD TASTER.
IF YOU GET RID OF ME NOW, YOU'LL BE FOUND OUT IN NO TIME.
I'D PREFER TO NOT MAKE TOO MUCH NOISE.
IS THAT TREMBLING IN YOUR LEFT HAND A SIDE-EFFECT OF THE REVIVAL ELIXIR?
AND IF IT IS?

THERE'S NO GUARANTEE SOMEONE WILL RETURN FROM THE DEAD IN PERFECT HEALTH.
WHY WOULD SHE GO TO SUCH LENGTHS? TO OUTWIT THE EMPEROR HIMSELF?
SHE MUST'VE UNDERSTOOD THAT ALL TOO WELL.
THD
THD
AND HOW DO I GET OUT OF THIS?
CLACK
YOU MAY WANT TO RECONSIDER YOUR ESCAPE.

?!
TUG
THAT IS, IF YOU CARE AT ALL ABOUT THIS GIRL.

SORRY... MAOMAO.
GRRND

WHAT DO YOU WANT?
GK GK
THIS WOULD BE SO MUCH EASIER IF IT JUST CAME TO BLOWS.
JUST TO LEAVE. WITH YOU.
I ASSURE YOU, I WON'T MAKE FOR MUCH OF A SHIELD.
HAH
THE INNER COURT?

PRETENDING TO BE A EUNUCH IS A SERIOUS CRIME, YOU KNOW.
BUT SHE'S NOT STUPID. SHE KNOWS THAT ALREADY.
NO.
YOU'RE COMING WITH ME. THAT'S THAT.
SNEER

DON'T YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW TO BREW AN ELIXIR THAT CAN REVIVE THE DEAD?

AN ELIXIR TO REVIVE THE DEAD?!
NNNNGH
I CAN'T AFFORD TO...
...UNDER-ESTIMATE HER.

Chapter 72: The Fox and the Tanuki Clash

WHAT IS YOUR BUSINESS HERE?
THE IMPERIAL COURT'S FOX AND TANUKI, OF THE EAST AND THE WEST.
THESE ARE NICKNAMES, OF A SORT, USED TO REFER TO...
...THE MILITARY TO THE EAST, AND THE CIVIL BUREAUCRACY TO THE WEST.
IT'S SAID AGED ANIMALS HAVE MYSTERIOUS POWERS.
I WONDER IF THAT APPLIES TO THEM.

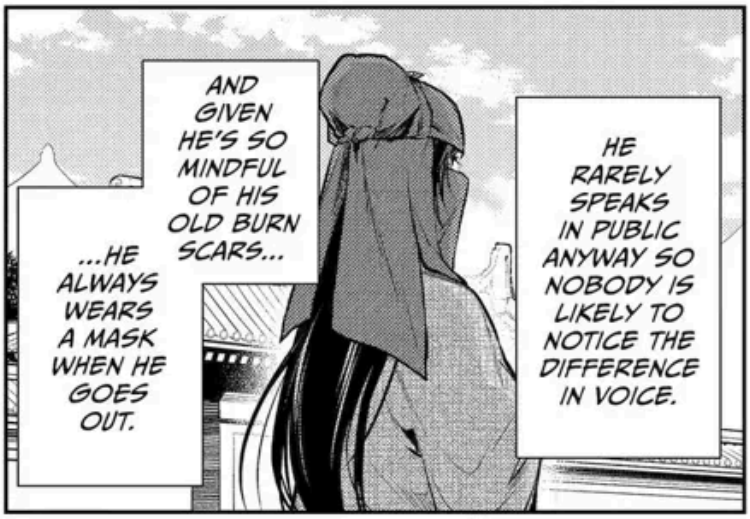
THE TANUKI TO THE WEST IS SHISHOU.
SON OF THE CHIEF OF THE SHIHOKU PROVINCE COVERING LI'S ENTIRE NORTHERN REGION.
THE FOX TO THE EAST IS KNOWN AS THE "TACTICIAN."
HE HAILS FROM AN ANCIENT FAMILY WITH GREAT INFLUENCE.
NOT AS MUCH AS SHISHOU'S FAMILY, BUT EVERYONE UNDER-STANDS HE IS NOT ONE TO BE TRIFLED WITH.
WELL, TO BE PRECISE, THE HUSBAND TO THE CHIEF'S DAUGHTER.
HE MARRIED INTO THE FAMILY.

EVEN NOW, MANY YEARS AFTER THE EMPRESS'S PASSING, HE AND HIS ROTUND BELLY SWAGGER AROUND THE COURT WITHOUT EQUAL.
HE COM-MANDED GREAT RESPECT, EVEN IN HIS YOUTH.
SHISHOU ALSO CURRIED MUCH OF THE EMPRESS'S FAVOR.

... SOME THINGS ARE JUST OUT OF MY CONTROL.
I KNOW IT'S WRONG TO LET MY PRESUMPTIONS STEER ME, BUT...
I DON'T HAVE A CLUE WHAT EITHER MAY BE THINKING.

IF MY TRUE MASTER WERE HERE WITH US...
...I MIGHT BE A HAIR LESS ANXIOUS.
I MEAN ...
GLANCE

I DON'T THINK ANYONE NOTICED WE USED A STAND-IN.
GRIN
MY, MY.


AND GIVEN HE'S SO MINDFUL OF HIS OLD BURN SCARS...
...HE ALWAYS WEARS A MASK WHEN HE GOES OUT.
HE RARELY SPEAKS IN PUBLIC ANYWAY SO NOBODY IS LIKELY TO NOTICE THE DIFFERENCE IN VOICE.

AND SITTING IS ALL THE JOB ENTAILS.
IT'S BEEN A MONTH SINCE HE LAST SAT IN ON A COURT COUNCIL MEETING.

THERE'S STILL TIME BEFORE THE WAR COUNCIL, AFTER ALL.
...NOW WOULD BE A PERFECT CHANCE TO SHARE SOME REFRESH-MENTS.
WE'VE SUCH A RARE GUEST TODAY, I JUST THOUGHT ...
I MAY NOT MAKE FOR INTERESTING COMPANY, OF COURSE.
THESE GUYS ARE SHREWD.
AND SINCE HE'S HERE, I INVITED SIR SHISHOU ALONG AS WELL.
BUT HE DOESN'T SEEM TO CARE.
YOU HAVING FREE TIME DOESN'T EQUAL US HAVING FREE TIME.

I NEED TO FIND OUT WHAT THEIR INTENTIONS ARE, BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE.
WE'LL DECLINE FOR TODAY.
...
TUG
I KNOW I'M SUPPOSED TO OBEY YOU...
...BUT WHAT COULD BE GOING THROUGH YOUR HEAD?

GLK GLK
HONESTLY, SUCH A DRINK REALLY DESERVES GLASS CUPS.
BETTER TO SAVOR THE SIGHT AND SMELL, YOU SEE.
AFTER YOU.
BUT HE'S PREPARED SILVER CUPS SO THERE'S NO NEED TO TASTE FOR POISON.

GLK
GLK
GLK
PWAH
SLRP
THE MASTER SAYS IT IS VERY RE-FRESHING.

GRIN
GRIN
AND WHAT'S WITH THAT FACE?
DOES HE KNOW?
RSTL
SWP
DESIGNS FOR A FEIFA?!

WAS IT TAKEN APART AND RECORDED IN THIS DIAGRAM?
FROM THE SHAPE ...
...IT LOOKS LIKE ONE THAT WAS USED DURING THE HUNTING INCIDENT.
THIS IS THE LATEST MODEL FROM THE WEST, YOU KNOW.
WHY IN THE WORLD WOULD HE JUST WHIP SOMETHING LIKE THIS OUT, OUT OF NOWHERE?
THAT MEANS IT DOESN'T NEED A FUSE, LIKE OLDER MODELS.
...THIS SPOT RIGHT HERE IS FLINT.
IT'S DIFFICULT TO SEE FROM THE DIAGRAM, BUT...
THAT IS...
IT'S ALSO SHOCKINGLY EASY TO MANUFACTURE.
...QUITE THE REVELATION.

車
卒
UNITS COULD HAVE MUCH TIGHTER FORMATIONS ...
...AND STILL BE INCREDIBLY MOBILE.
IF WE PRODUCED THESE EN MASSE...
...IT WOULD TOTALLY TRANSFORM HOW WE DO BATTLE.
PIECES THAT COULD ONLY ATTACK STRAIGHT AHEAD...
... WOULD GAIN SUBSTANTIAL HORIZONTAL MOVEMENT. A POWERFUL THREAT.
AND TO THINK...
...THESE WERE IN THE HANDS OF TRAITORS AFTER THE CROWN PRINCE'S LIFE.
CURIOUS INDEED.

HE SAYS THAT, BUT HE'S STILL GRINNING.
THIS IS FUN FOR HIM.
BUT THAT'S ALREADY HIT A SNAG!
HOW COULD SUCH WEAPONS HAVE MADE THEIR WAY HERE?
WELL ...
...THAT IS WHAT WE INTEND TO FIND OUT.
SOMEONE IN YOUR DEPART-MENT GOT... OVER-ZEAL-OUS?
AND NOW OUR ONLY LEAD ON THAT CAN'T SHARE ANYTHING ANYMORE!
...BUT GOING TOO FAR IN TORTURING THE SUSPECT FOR INFORMATION LIKE THAT IS ODD.
WAS IT JUST INCOMPE-TENCE?
THREAT-ENING THE LIVES OF THE ROYAL FAMILY FORFEITS YOUR RIGHTS ...
I WAS REALLY HOPING TO LEARN SOME-THING.

SWSH
RSTL
RSTL
GULP...
NOM
NOM
KHH...
TA-DAH...

TELL ME. YOU HAVEN'T HEARD ANYTHING PERTINENT, HAVE YOU?
IF I HAD...
...YOU CAN REST ASSURED I WOULD HAVE REPORTED IT.
THAT WASN'T IT?
ON TO THE MAIN TOPIC, THEN.
HA AH
I SEE. TOO BAD.

...AND THIS IS?
THE GO GAME I PLAYED WITH MY WIFE YESTERDAY!

EVEN I CAN TELL THEIR RELATIONSHIP IS FAR FROM ORDINARY.
THERE'S A FAMOUS STORY AROUND THESE PARTS ABOUT...
...AN ECCENTRIC TACTICIAN PAYING A KING'S RANSOM FOR A COURTESAN.
AND HOW I SHIVERED! WITH EXCITEMENT! TREPIDATION!
WITS AS SHARP AS ANY BLADE, CLASHING OVER AND OVER AGAIN!

SPEAKING OF ESCAPING... FOR ONCE, I KNOW JUST WHAT THE TANUKI IS THINKING.
I ESCAPED BY THE SKIN OF MY TEETH!
BUT THEN THIS NEXT MOVE...
UNTHINK-ABLE!
WAHA
THIS MOVE, RIGHT IN THE MID-STAGE!
WAHA
AH. TOO BAD.
APOLOGIES FOR INTERRUPTING, BUT I HAVE BUSINESS I REALLY MUST ATTEND TO.
THANK YOU FOR THE DRINK.
CLATTER

IT REALLY WAS A STUPENDOUS GAME.
I SHOULD HAVE A COPY OF THE RECORD DRAWN UP AND SENT YOUR WAY. YES? COMMENTARY INCLUDED?
...NO. THERE'S NO NEED.
PLEASE, SIR SHISHOU, DON'T BE SHY.
I'LL INCLUDE A COPY OF OUR LAST GAME, TOO. PLEASE, PERUSE AT YOUR LEISURE!
SOME OTHER TIME, THEN.
SOME OTHER TIME, WITH GLASS CUPS.
SO THIS GORGEOUS RED COLOR MIGHT BE ON FULL DISPLAY.

WE'VE MUCH TO TALK ABOUT, DON'T WE? A CHANCE TO DISCUSS OUR WIVES WOULD BE EXCEP-TIONAL.
SURE ENOUGH.
...RED?
SO...
...I IMPLORE YOU TO RECONSIDER.

VERY PECULIAR, NO?
JUICE MADE FROM...
...GREEN GRAPES, OF ALL THINGS.
WHAT WAS THAT ABOUT?

JUST AS MY UNCLE SAID.
NOW, MOVING ON TO MOVE 180!
THERE'S MORE?!

HA...AH...
I'M EXHAUSTED ...
CAN I TAKE THIS CHANCE TO DO UP MY HAIR?
GO AHEAD.
I'LL BE KEEPING A LOOKOUT. TAKE YOUR TIME.
WITH ELEVATED SHOES AND PADDED SHOULDERS...
...WHO COULD HAVE GUESSED THAT PLAYING THE PART OF THE IMPERIAL YOUNGER BROTHER ...

I KNOW SHE'S ABOUT AS OLD AS MY FATHER ...
...BUT SHE LOOKS TEN YEARS YOUNGER, AT LEAST.
...WAS A FORMER MEMBER OF THE FOUR PRINCIPAL CONSORTS.
IF WE WERE DEALING WITH A FOX AND A TANUKI...
...SHE'D BE MORE AKIN TO A PROUD HUNTING HOUND.
AND HE'S SO KEEN ON HIS WIFE, ISN'T HE?
HE'S THE SAME WITH HIS DAUGHTER.
THE FOX IS SO STRANGE, HE MAKES THE TANUKI SEEM NORMAL.

PLEASE, DON'T EVEN ASK.
WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF WORD GOT OUT, DO YOU THINK?
...AH.
"MAOMAO HASN'T COME BACK."
LAST NIGHT, A LETTER SAYING AS MUCH...
...ARRIVED FROM THE JADE PALACE'S HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING.

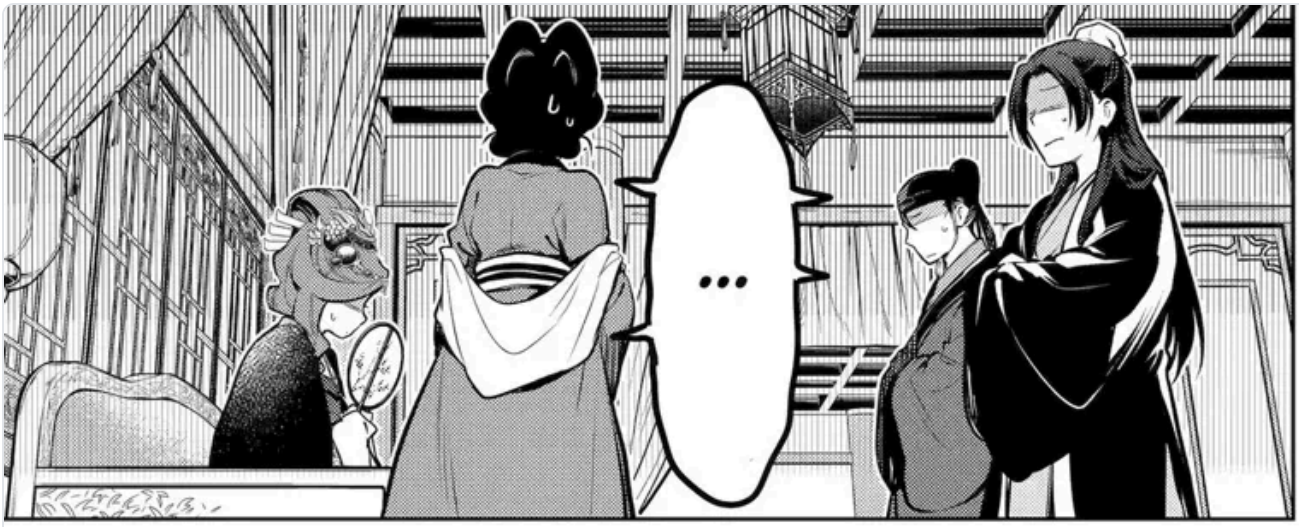
USUALLY, SHE'D BE BACK BY MORNING.
IF IT WERE ONLY A MATTER OF HER BEING OUT ON HER OWN AT NIGHT...
...THERE WOULDN'T BE ANY CONCERN.
IN FACT, JINSHI HAS ENCOUNTERED HER LATE AT NIGHT BEFORE.
BUT THE FACT THAT SHE HASN'T RETURNED IS WORRYING.
MAOMAO TENDS TO UNDERVALUE HERSELF...
...BUT SHE STILL UNDERSTANDS ALL TOO WELL...
...THE PUNISHMENT FOR LEAVING YOUR MISTRESS WITHOUT PERMISSION.

THE JADE PALACE
I CAN ASSURE YOU, I'M NOT.
MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS THAT YOU MIGHT HAVE TAKEN HER AWAY ...
...BUT FROM THE LOOK OF THINGS, I SUPPOSE THAT'S NOT THE CASE.
YOU SEEM IN FINE SPIRITS.
PLEASE, HAVE YOU EVER KNOWN ME TO BE SO DISCOUR-TEOUS?
I'M AFRAID SHE MUST HAVE STUCK HER NOSE WHERE IT WASN'T WELCOME AGAIN.

I ONLY CAME FOR A FORMAL GREET-ING...
...BUT NEITHER OF US CAN LEAVE THINGS ALONE.
WHERE WAS SHE LAST SEEN?
NOON, THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY.
SHE VISITED THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE TO GATHER MOXA...
...AT WHICH POINT HER FATHER SENT HER ON AN ERRAND TO THE WRITING CLASSROOM.
MAOMAO ASKED THAT THEY DRAW UP HEALTH NOTICES TO BE POSTED ALL AROUND THE INNER COURT.
THE EUNUCH THERE SAID AS MUCH HIMSELF.
NOBODY'S SEEN HER SINCE.

I CAN'T IMAGINE MAOMAO WOULD SIMPLY DISAPPEAR OF HER OWN ACCORD.
IN THAT CASE, THERE MUST BE SOME REASON SHE CAN'T COME BACK ...
...OR SOMETHING KEEPING HER FROM COMING BACK.
IN THE WORST CASE...
WE'VE LOOKED UP AND DOWN FOR ANY SIGN OF HER, TO NO AVAIL.
SHE MUST HAVE GOTTEN WRAPPED UP IN SOMETHING.

COULD THERE BE ANYONE HARBORING A GRUDGE TOWARD HER?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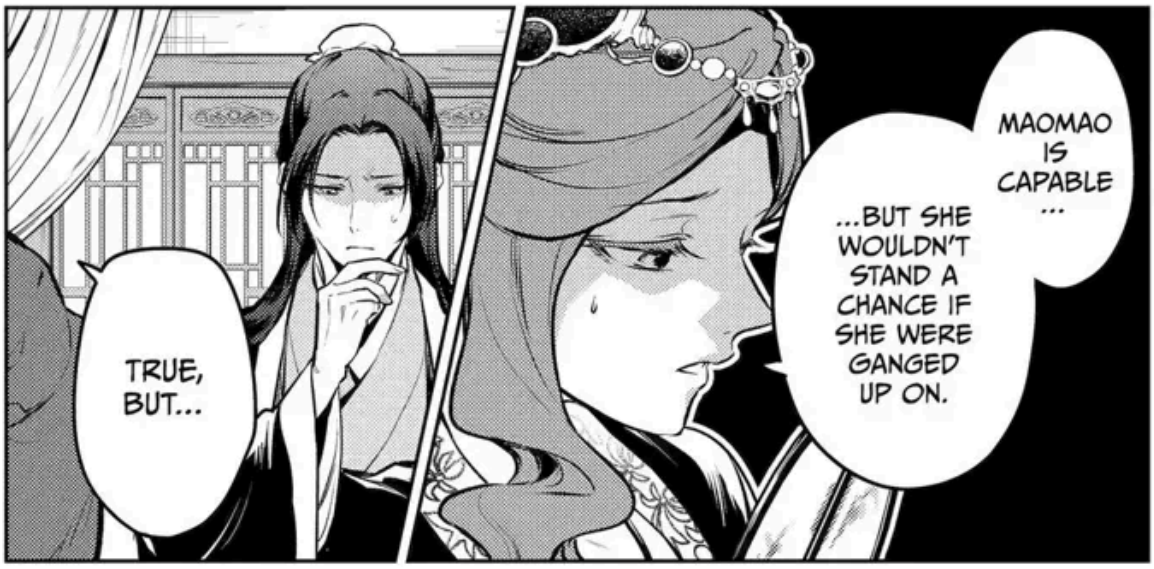
MAOMAO IS CAPABLE ...
...BUT SHE WOULDN'T STAND A CHANCE IF SHE WERE GANGED UP ON.
TRUE, BUT...

...EVEN THEN, I DOUBT SHE WOULD SIMPLY GIVE UP WITHOUT A FIGHT.

RIGHT.
SHE ISN'T SO WEAK THAT SHE'D JUST ROLL OVER AND DIE.
SHE MUST HAVE THOUGHT OF SOMETHING.
EITHER WAY, WE HAVE TO FIND HER.
COUNTLESS EXCEPTIONS HAVE BEEN MADE FOR HER...
...BUT AN UNEXPLAINED DISAPPEARANCE LIKE THIS MUST BE PUNISHED.
A LINE HAS TO BE DRAWN SOMEWHERE.
LET'S RETRACE HER STEPS ONE MORE TIME.